Stasis in Quentin's Section of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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For Quentin Compson in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, time has become such a ponderous obsession that clocks, watches, and bells dominate the psychic landscape of the section that he narrates. Led by Jean-Paul Sartre, literary critics have commonly stressed Quentin's inability to see beyond the past, but I believe that a specific examination of stasis, or "stopped time," as employed in Quentin's Section will offer some equally significant insights into both what time means for Quentin and how Faulkner the artist works with problems of time.

To discuss the use of stasis in Quentin's Section, I will briefly discuss some criticism directly and indirectly relating to Faulkner's treatment of time. Then I will focus on certain patterns of imagery associated with stasis, primarily twilight and honeysuckle. Close examination of these images and especially of their use in the scene that I will call the "Branch Scene" should create a richer understanding of Faulkner's technique of thematic development through the use of stasis.

In his influential essay "Time in the Work of Faulkner," Jean-Paul Sartre compares Faulkner's view of the world with that of "a man sitting in an open car and looking backwards" (SF 255). But even as Sartre's exquisite metaphor has proved irresistible to many critics, I believe it has unfortunately proved all-encompassing and inescapable for too many of them. That is, I believe that even though the idea holds much truth—that Faulkner's characters are indeed obsessed with the past—there is some-

thing more and something different at work in Faulkner's use of stasis. Perhaps it is ironic, then, that Sartre, in the same essay, mentions the importance of stasis in Faulkner's work but does not place it in what I take to be its proper perspective. For although Sartre says, "It seems as though Faulkner has laid hold of a frozen speed at the very heart of things" (SF 255), Sartre fails to connect the use of frozen time with one of his earlier observations specifically about *The Sound and the Fury:* "As soon as we begin to look at any episode, it opens up to reveal behind it other episodes, all the other episodes" (SF 253). I suggest that Faulkner uses stasis in the Quentin Section primarily to reveal and even to create levels of meaning and irony that would not exist otherwise.

A metaphor more appropriate to my interpretation of stasis in Quentin's Section was originated by Ford Madox Ford, who, in discussing fiction, likened the "simultaneity" produced by the narrative device of "time-shifting" to the effect experienced by a person looking out of a window "through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you" (cited in Wimsatt and Brooks 685). To apply this metaphor to Quentin, we can say that even as he views the present reality around him—the Massachusetts landscape through a streetcar's window, for instance—he is always aware of the reflection of Caddy's face "behind" him, in his memory. Thus, the way that Faulkner creates an otherwise unattainable density of meaning through the use of stasis is central to my reading of this section of the novel.

Throughout Quentin's Section, the image of twilight is used to represent a suspension of time, but the twilight image is for Quentin highly personal, idiosyncratic. An instance near the end of the section is representative of the many occurrences of this image: "I could see the twilight again, that quality of light as if time really had stopped for a while, with

the sun hanging just under the horizon..." (SF 103). To arrive at the special meaning of twilight for Quentin, we must reassemble into a discernible form some fragments of experience that his mind has scattered about. For in Quentin's mind, twilight is associated not only with stasis but also with what are for him more eminent realities: despair, Caddy's sexuality and loss of virginity, and ultimately his own death.

Near the beginning of the section, Quentin recalls his father giving him a watch, which Mr. Compson says is "the mausoleum of all hope and desire" (SF 47). Thus having learned something about the meaninglessness of life from his father, Quentin thinks of the ticking of the watch as a "long diminishing parade of time" (SF 47). Later at Harvard he hears a bell striking (the bell has for the moment assumed the place of his father's watch), and Quentin's tormented mind fuses into one static image the sound of the bell, a vision of twilight, the sensation of despair, and his painful musings about Caddy's sexuality:

> The hour began to strike .... It was a while before the last stroke ceased vibrating. It stayed in the air, more felt than heard, for a long time. Like all the bells that ever rang still ringing in the long dying light-rays and Jesus and Saint Francis talking about his sister. Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. (SF 49)

The effect of Faulkner's narrative technique here enables Quentin to temporarily stop time to permit immediate experience (the sound of the bell) to serve as a transparent layer beneath which lies the more meaningful, more insistent reality of memory (images of the past associated with Caddy's loss of virginity). In keeping with Ford's metaphor of the

window's reflection, Quentin here perceives the sensations of the present "around" him, but his psychic gaze is simultaneously fixed on the image of Caddy and the private hell he would have them inhabit.

Twilight becomes more clearly associated with Quentin's anguish over Caddy's sexuality when he recalls his mother's melodramatic bereavement in reaction to Caddy's loss of virginity. In describing Mrs. Compson, he remembers "a face reproachful tearful an odor of camphor and of tears a voice weeping steadily and softly" (SF 58). And in the same passage, Quentin thinks of Caddy: "beyond the twilit door the twilight-colored smell of honeysuckle. Bringing empty trunks down the attic stairs they sounded like coffins" (SF 58). The images of twilight and honeysuckle here become inextricably entangled in Quentin's mind, and throughout the remainder of the section these images occur either together or even, I believe, interchangeably. Why does Quentin join these disparate images, both of which he associates with stasis? The answer to this question is complex, and I believe it can shed a good deal of light on the way stasis works in Quentin's Section.

The Branch Scene that appears in Quentin's Section is central to the meaning of the images of twilight and honeysuckle—and indeed to the meaning of Quentin's general neurosis. Quentin describes the twilit scene where he and Caddy meet (starting at SF 89), the mood and atmosphere of which resemble a frozen moment, suspended, perhaps dead: "In the gray darkness a little light her hands locked about... her knees her face looking at the sky the smell of honeysuckle upon her face and throat..." (SF 89). Then, in a passage that reveals the depths of Quentin's emotional hell, he tries to convince Caddy that they have committed incest:

> You thought it was them but it was me listen I fooled you all the time it was me you thought I was in the house where that

> damn honeysuckle trying not to think the swing the cedars the secret surges the breathing locked drinking the wild breath the yes Yes Yes yes.... Did you love them Caddy did you love them. (SF 90)

That Quentin associates honeysuckle with Caddy's sexuality is unmistakable, as is the fact that Quentin is psychologically tortured in his obsession with her loss of virginity. Thus, the image of twilight mixing with honeysuckle becomes increasingly potent in Quentin's mind, and it serves to heighten his psychological suffering:

> the gray light the smell of honeysuckle... her face looked at the sky it was low so low that all smells and sounds of night seemed to have been crowded down like under a slack tent especially the honeysuckle it had got into my breathing it was on her face and throat like paint... I had to pant to get any air at all out of that thick gray honeysuckle. (SF 92)

When Caddy asks Quentin about his own sexual experiences—"Poor Quentin youve never done that have you"—Quentin tries to lie about his virginity: "yes yes lots of times with lots of girls" (SF 92). But his subsequent behavior betrays him: "then I was crying her hand touched me again and I was crying against her damp blouse" (SF 92). Like a child too emotionally frail to maintain the guise that conceals an obvious falsehood, Quentin breaks down. Further, the suggestion that Caddy serves as a mother-figure for the emotionally wounded Quentin recurs throughout the novel: Caddy is consistently associated with knowledge and experience, whereas Quentin typically acts out of boyish idealism. In this way, Quentin resembles his brother Benjy, who is also "mothered" by Caddy.

The climax of the Branch Scene comes in a moment when Quentin's consciousness must bear the simultaneous onslaught of two painful realities: first, the immediate, present-tense truth of Caddy's sexual "fall"; and second, the childhood memory of the Compson children playing in the branch, which ironically contains the image of Caddy's stained drawers, an image that foreshadows her later sexual "stain." It is critical to recognize that Quentin's memory of the "innocent" Caddy is for him just as immediate and substantial as the scene around him at that moment. Once again, Faulkner's use of stasis to superimpose one stratum of meaning upon another can be well appreciated in the context of Ford's "reflection in a window" metaphor. In a moment of pathos and irony, Quentin recalls that day of innocence when the children swam in the branch, and he is simultaneously confronted by the image of the promiscuous Caddy who stands before him. He calmly asks Caddy, "do you remember the day dammudy died when you sat down in the water in your drawers.... Caddy do you remember how Dilsey fussed at you because your drawers were muddy" (SF 92). But even as he shares what might normally be a nostalgic memory, Quentin all the while holds the point of his knife at Caddy's throat. The surreal mood pervading this scene is rather like that of an Elizabethan dumb show, evincing both a ghostly quiet and a tense, macabre eroticism. This mood is further manifested in Caddy's acquiescence to Quentin's proposal of a murder-suicide. When Quentin says, "it wont take but a second just a second then I can do mine [cut his own throat]," Caddy replies, "all right can you do yours by yourself... all right... push it" (SF 92). The murder-suicide is aborted only when Quentin again breaks down in tears; Caddy whispers, "dont cry poor Quentin," but he states that he "couldnt stop she held my head against her damp hard breast" (SF 92). Once more, Caddy's maternal strength (and indeed her sexual maturity) is acutely contrasted with Quentin's puerile fragility.

Another key point in the Branch Scene provides some crucial thematic development for Quentin's Section. In this part of the Branch Scene, Faulkner uses stasis to reinforce death imagery and a general mood of decay, which in turn reflect the content of Quentin and Caddy's dialogue. The scene is thus described by Quentin: "outside the gray light the shadows of things like dead things in stagnant water" (SF 96). In a fit of pain and jealousy over Caddy's impending marriage, Quentin cries, "I wish you were dead.... Ill kill you do you hear" (SF 96). And Caddy's reply discloses just one dark fragment of the truth about the Compson family: "Im bad anyway you cant help it theres a curse on us its not our fault is it our fault... [that] theres a curse on us" (SF 96).

I believe that the events that occur during the Branch Scene may have worked to convince Quentin that he has indeed been living under a kind of curse. Shortly before Quentin's suicide, his thoughts suggest that he may have accepted his father's philosophy of despair. According to Quentin, Mr. Compson "was teaching us that all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away the sawdust flowing from what wound in what side that not for me died not." (SF 107)

Near the end of Quentin's Section, as he rides on the streetcar approaching the Charles River for the last time, he observes "the road going on under the twilight, into twilight and the sense of water peaceful and swift beyond" (SF 103). As happens so frequently for Quentin, this moment of "dead" time opens the way for dark, funereal musings. Above all, Quentin's thoughts here reveal his rapidly decaying sense of identity:

> I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of gray halflight where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had

> felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who. (SF 103)

That Quentin's phrases "without relevance" and "denial of... significance" suggest echoes of Macbeth's "sound and fury, signifying nothing" should not be taken as coincidence: Quentin, as we have observed, has himself deteriorated into a virtual "walking shadow." Earlier, as the bell at Harvard was "ringing in the long dying light-rays," Quentin tried to imagine a world where "[t]hings just finished themselves" (SF 49). At the end, suspended for a few moments in the "gray halflight" of his disintegrating consciousness, Quentin prepares to finish his own "shadowy paradoxical" existence.

Works Cited

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